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Breaking the Stereotype ‘Stepmother’ In The Novel *Clover* By Dori Sanders

Abstract: The Paper Explores On The Common Misinterpretation Of The Term Stepmother Which Has Resulted In A Renowned Stereotype. It Is Time To Change The Mindset Of The People Who Think Stepmothers As Antagonists. Children, Who Listen To The Story Of Cinderella And Snowwhite, Create A Stereotype Within Their Mind And Fear About Having A Stepmother In The Lack Of Their Biological Mother. It Is To Be Noted That, Children Who Lack Mother’s Care Will Always Have A Tendency To Do Odd Things During Their Childhood. Only The Care Of A Mother Can Cure This Problem. Mother, Either Biological Or Substitute, Has A Great Role In The Life Of Young Child, As Mother Is The One Who Moulds The Character Of Her Child. She Is The Mender Who Feels Responsible For The Whole Activities Of The Child. Sometimes A Substitute Mother Can Take Care Of A Child Even Better Than The Biological Mother. Such Good Substitute Mothers Make Their Mind Ready To Accept The Child And To Take All The Responsibility Of Them. In The Novel, *Clover*, The Young Motherless Girl Clover Finds Solace In The Hands Of Her Stepmother By Breaking All The Stereotypes And Leads A Blissful Life.

Keywords: Stereotype, Stepmother, Antagonists, Childhood, Biological Mother

... Anybody Who Knows The Story About Cinderella Should Know That Nobody In The World Would Want A Stepmother Unless They Were All The Way Crazy - Clover 34

One Cares For Literature Primarily On Account Of Its Deep And Lasting Human Significance. A Great Book Grows Directly Out Of Life; In Reading It, The Readers Are Brought Into Large, Close, And Fresh Relations With Life; And In That Fact Lay The Final Explanation Of Its Power. According To Hudson, In His *An Introduction To The Study Of Literature*, "Literature Is A Vital Record Of What Men Have Seen In Life, What They Have Experienced Of It, What They Have Thought And Felt About Those Aspects Of It Which Have The Most Immediate And Enduring Interest For All Of Us. It Is, Thus Fundamentally An Expression Of Life Through The Medium Of Language." (Hudson 10)

Sanders, In Her Debut Novel *Clover*, Depicts The Functioning Of Motherhood Crossing All The Boundaries Of Racism. This Single Narrative Novel, Which Is Set In The 1980s Of South Carolina Is The Period Where Exists Separate Communities For African American And White People. Sanders Presents Cross-Racial Mother-Daughter Relationship In An Optimistic Way. She Fixes Her Mother-Daughter Characters Not Only Within The Context Of Nuclear Family, But Also Based On The Fictional Town Of Round Hill, By Keeping The African American Tradition.

Clover, The Ten Year Old African American Girl Is The Daughter Of A School Head Master Named Gaten Hill. Clover Loses Her Mother When She Was Too Young And She Lives With Her Father And Grandfather As A Motherless Child. She Becomes Very Outrageous In Her School With Her Co-Students. Clover's Life Changes Upside Down When Her Father Gaten Dies In A Car Accident, A Few Hours After His Wedding With A White Woman Named, Sara Kate. Like Other Girls, Clover Too Faces The Fear For Being A Stepdaughter For Her New Stepmother. When Her Father Introduces Sara Kate To Her Saying, "Sara Kate... Is Going To Be Your New Stepmother, Clover" (Clover 4), She Almost

Reaches The State Of Crying. In The Novel, Kate And Clover Are Alien To One Another As They Have Met Only A Handful Of Occasions Before Gaten Marries Kate And Then Is Immediately Killed Just After The Marriage With Kate, Leaving His Only Daughter Clover In Her Custody.

For All The Women In Clover's Family, Accepting Sara Kate As Clover's Mother Becomes An Impossible Thing And This Makes Things Hard For The Union Of Clover And Sara Kate. As Clover Gradually Accepts Her Stepmother's Love, It Is As If Her Father Was Reaching Out From The Grave To Comfort And Assure Her That She Will Be In Good Hands. The Turning Point Of The Story Occurs After Clover Defiantly Curses Sara Kate About Her Cooking. When Everleen Sides With Her Sister-In-Law And Makes Clover Apologize, Clover Begins To Understand Her Stepmother's Sincere Devotion. The Rest Of The Family And The Community Then Open Their Hearts To Sara Kate When She Saves Jim Ed's Life By Giving Him Mouth-To-Mouth Resuscitation After He's Stung By Yellow Jackets In The Peach Orchard.

Silence Plays A Significant Role In Clover's Life. From Her Narrative, It Is Obvious That A Racial Conflict Exists Between The Young Girl And Her Stepmother. But Later Clover Makes Up Her Mind To Accept And Keep Loyalty Towards Her Stepmother Through Silences. Sanders Advances The Novel Into An Optimistic Approach By Neglecting All The Racial Conflicts That Can Act As An Obstacle For The Mother-Daughter Relationship. Clover Feels Discomposure That The Town People Will Interrupt Her Acceptance Of Her Stepmother. But When Sara Kate Rescues Uncle Jim Ed, The Whole Town People Start To Accept Her Too. For Clover, Sara Kate Is A Surprise. She Says "She Was A Surprise For Me From The Start" (Clover 29).

"I Cannot Understand Why Gaten Always Seemed To Think I Needed Extra Help In Being Raised, Anyway. All My Life, As Far Back As I Can Remember, I've Just Had One

Person At A Time. First It Was My Grandpa Before He Died. And Then I Had Gaten”

(Clover 81) Clover Says. But The Irony Of This Statement Is That, All Her Life She Lived With Single Parent. First It Is Her Grandfather, Then Gaten And Later, After Gaten’s Death, Clover Lives Her Life With Sara Kate, Her Stepmother. This Time, She Feels No Biological Bond, It Is Necessary For Her To Build A Bond Between Her And Her Stepmother Sara Kate, Who Is A Woman Of Strangeness. Clover Fails To Compare Sara Kate With Her Other Mothers Who Are Around Her. On The Evolution Of The Mother-Daughter Relationship Between Sara Kate And Clover, Nelson Emmanuel, In His *Contemporary African American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* Says,

Although The Two Initially Have Problems Adjusting To Each Other Culturally, Clover And Sara Kate Find Themselves Forming An Unlikely Alliance. As Clover Grows To Love Her Stepmother, She Finds Herself Torn Between The Family Where Everyone Tells Her She Belongs (Her Father’s Family), And The One In Which She Is Beginning To Feel The Love Shared Between A Mother And A Daughter. (Nelson 408)

Clover Must Find A Solution To Filter The Negative Stereotypes About White Women In Round Hill Community In Order To Accept Sara Kate By The Round Hill Community. The Process Through Which Sara Kate And Clover Come To Trust One Another Involves A Willingness To Step Out Of Their Scripted Roles Of Stepmother And Stepdaughter, White Woman And Black Girl, And Cultivate The Intimacy That Will Enable Them To View Each Other As Individuals. Clover Reflects On Living With Sara Kate:

There Is Just The Two Of Us. A Stepmother And Child. Two People In A House. Together, Yet Apart. Aside From [Sara Kate’s] Music, The House Is Too Quiet. We Move About In Separate Ways. We Are Like Peaches. Peaches Picked From The Same Tree, But Put In Separate Baskets ... If Sara Kate And

I Ever Forget Who We Are, And Sometimes We Do, Then We Are At Ease
With Each Other And We Have A Pretty Good Little Time Together.
Sometimes We Even Laugh. (Clover 100)

Through The Final Mother-Daughter Scene In The Novel, Clover's Trust Of Sara Kate Is Acknowledged As She Tells Sara Kate About Her Long Held Wish For A Purple Ten-Speed Bicycle. She Asks Sara Kate To Save The Money She Would Spend On New School Clothes To Apply Towards The Purchase Of Clover's Dream. To This Divulgence, Sara Kate Responds, "Why, Clover, If It's A Ten-Speed Purple Bicycle You Want Then That's What You'll Get. But We'll Still Have To Get Some New School Clothes" (Clover 176). To The Reader Clover Remarks, "My Wish Has Finally Come True. I Am Going To Get My Purple Bicycle" (Clover 176). While This Statement Looks Materialistic, The Subtext Allegorically Conveys The Fulfillment Of Her Desire To Have An Enduring Maternal Figure.

The Mother-Daughter Relationship Between Clover And Sara Kate Overcomes The Boundary Of Racial Discrimination And Ignorance Through The Intimacy Built In Daily Encounters With One Another And Sometimes These Encounters Lead To Mutual Understanding. Their Relationship Can Also Be Termed As A Friendship Negotiation. Clover And Sara Kate, Who Are Strangers In The Beginning, Try To Gain Each Other's Trust. They Both Empathise With Each Other Without The Cultural Blinders Of Stereotype Or The Stereotypes Regarding Stepmother.

Learning To Sense Sara Kate's Feelings Lessens Clover's Hostility, And Helps Clover To "Forget" The Stereotypes She's Been Taught And See Sara Kate In A More Humane Light. Despite The Process Of Adapting To One Another Progresses Slowly, Sara Kate And Clover Gradually Replace Their Mutual Strangeness With Familiarity. As A Result, Sara Kate Begins To Influence Clover's Behaviour In Subtle Ways: "They Say When

Two People Live Together, They Start To Look Alike. Well, Sara Kate And I Have Been Living Together For A Long Time And There Is No Way We Will Ever Look Alike. But In Strange Little Ways, We Are Starting To Act Alike” (Clover 130). For Instance, The Rambunctious Clover Becomes Gentler, Losing Her Relish For Killing Insects. When She Discovers A Large Spider, She Realizes The Subtle Impact Sara Kate Is Having On Her:

“I Was All Set To Cream The Thing, When I Thought About Sara Kate. Somehow I Just Couldn’t Bring Myself To Kill It. That Was The First Time Something Like That Happened To Me. Sara Kate’s Thinking Is Rubbing Off On Me For Sure.... A Part Of Me Was Little By Little Starting To Obey And Care For Sara Kate Without My Even Knowing It” (Clover 163).

Clover Says, “Things Are Shaping Up Pretty Good Between Us” (Clover 131). She Even Starts To Speak Her Mind. She Makes Sara Kate Happy By Giving Her What She Likes And Even By Saying, “You Know Something, Sara Kate, It Wouldn’t Hurt You One Bit To Come Up To That Peach Shed For Some Peaches”(Clover 130). The Peach Farm Belonged To Gaten And As Gaten Is Dead, It Definitely Belongs To His Wife, Sara Kate. Clover Tries To Praise Sara Kate’s Activities Even Before Everleen. At The Same Time She Never Forgets To Show Her Love For Her Aunt Everleen. She Says, “I Go Over To Her And Say, “Oh, Aunt Everleen, If You Stop Cooking Darkness Will Cover The Earth”” (Clover 134). Clover Knows That Her Aunt Is Possessive Towards Her. She Works Well Not Make Both Her Substitute Mother Sad.

It Is Almost True That The Stories Of Cinderella And Snowwhite Have Created A Great Impact In The Minds Of The Children About The Idea Of Having A Substitute Or A Stepmother In Their Life. This Stereotype Even Widens The Distance Between The Stepmother, Stepchildren Relationship With Strangeness And A Fear Within Them. That Particular Fear Leads To Hatred And Later To Separation. But It Is To Be Noted That There

Are Several Stepmothers Who Are Ready To Accept Their Stepchildren With All Their Love. The Stepmother Portrayal Is Often Admired Since This Woman Willingly Accepts The Responsibility For Another Woman's Offspring. She Commands Respect From Everyone. She Is A Woman So Much In Touch With Her Maternal Instincts, That For Her, Every Child Is Born From Her Heart, Not Necessarily From Her Womb. This Unselfish Woman Extends Her Hand And Heart To A Child In Need Of Protection, Encouragement, And Security.

The Stories Of Cinderella And Snow White And Many Other Stories Have Succeeded In Creating A Stereotypical Concept About The Term Stepmother. Even The Word Meaning For Stepmother Refers To Ignorance. According To *The Shorter English Dictionary On Historical Principles* Prepared By William Little, H.W. Fowler And J. Coulson, The Word Stepmother Means “The Wife Of One’s Father By A Subsequent Marriage... With Suggestion Of Unfairness Or Cruelty” (Little 456). A Girl Who Is Young In Her Age Can Only Fear About The Strange Lady Who Becomes Her Stepmother. Motherhood Is A Precious Bond Between A Mother And A Child Which Is Inevitable. It Would Be More Precise To Mention That It Is Not Compulsory That The Caregiver Must Be The Primary Mother Figure. It Can Be Biological Mother, Surrogate Mother, Mother Substitute Or A Stepmother. It Is Time To Eliminate The Stereotypical Meaning Of Stepmother, Which Creates A Panic In The Hearts Of Young Children Who Has No Mother To Take Care Of Them.

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